GOD'S UNCHOSEN PEOPLE
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Psalm 111
Jonah 3–4

"And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know
their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" Jonah 4:11(NRSV)

In synagogues and mosques and churches all over the country this weekend, communities of faith are pausing in their proceedings to ponder the loss Saturday morning of the Space Shuttle Columbia and its crew of seven:

Mourning the loss of those precious lives: six Americans, one Israeli
Praying for their families
Pondering the risks explorers have always had to take on behalf of humankind, and
Thinking about the human spirit that transcends nation and race and ethnicity to reach ever upward into the mystery of the unknown.

So let us join that larger human community in prayer this morning.

Lord of all, creator of the universe, we thank you this morning for the human spirit which we believe is a reflection of you: for human curiosity and courage and the willingness to risk and dare in the cause of truth. We thank you for the precious lives of the crew of Columbia, for their exquisite gifts, their dedication to their vocation, and their sense of duty to their mission, their nations, and to all of us. We ask your blessing on their families and loved ones: keep and comfort them in the days ahead.

And we pray, O God of every nation, for our nation in this important and precarious hour. Give us courage to use the blessings of our freedom, our resources, for the advancement of truth and the betterment of humankind and for the establishment of peace and justice and security for all your children.

We thank you, O God, for the love that is with us always: for the promise that even if we take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest

limits of the sea, even there your hand shall hold us fast; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Many years ago I worked with a church secretary whose real love, her abiding passion actually, was politics: national politics, but particularly local party politics—partisan, personal politics. In fact, the only reason she agreed to work with me was because her party had lost the last election; when the tide changed and her side won, she resigned and went to work, happily, in City Hall. Every morning when she came to work, Anne would regale me with political stories, horror stories, stories about how awful the other people were; how dishonest and unfair and uncaring; how occasionally crooked and evil. And every morning at the end of the "diatribe du jour," recounting some terrible malfeasance, she would conclude by saying, "God is going to get them for that!"

She was not serious, of course, but there is something about us that wants to organize the world into "us and them," insiders and outsiders, good and evil, true and false, faithful and infidel, saved and damned. And while, at one level, it is not only harmless but also energizing (as it is in local party politics) and fun (as it is in partisanship about sports teams), at another level, when it gets wrapped up with race and ethnicity, for instance, or nationalism or religion, the stakes become quickly higher and the dynamic becomes deadly. When race, ethnicity, and religion are involved in the "us and them" dynamic, the "other"—whoever it is—is marginalized, demonized, and ultimately rendered expendable.

The Nazis did that to the Jews and the Gypsies as well as handicapped and homosexual persons and played out that dynamic to the bitter, horrible end of extermination camps. And in our day alone, our brief sliver of human history, we have seen it repeated with tragic and horrible consistency.

Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda
Hindus and Muslims in India and Pakistan
Arabs and Jews in Israel and Palestine
Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland
Catholics, Muslims, and Eastern Orthodox in Croatia, Bosnia, and Yugoslavia

Among the experiences I shall never forget are visits in Croatia, representing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), just after the shooting had stopped. Our purpose was to bring support and encouragement to the tiny but courageous Reformed Church there. And within about forty-eight hours, our American Presbyterian Mission worker, Steve Kurtz, gave us a clinic in the dynamics that produced the most appalling and certainly ugliest phase in our own lifetime "ethnic cleansing." We visited the Roman Catholic

hierarchy, who carefully and politely explained that the region's problems were caused by the Serbians who are Orthodox. And we visited with Orthodox clergy who were clear that the injustices perpetrated on them started with a battle against Islamic forces some 700 years ago and were exacerbated today by the Roman Catholics. The only the thing the Croatian Catholics and Serbian Orthodox agreed on was that Muslims were an unwelcome presence. So we visited a Bosnian Muslim refugee camp—which both sides warned us would be a dirty and dangerous place. It was neither. Our experience was punctuated by a visit to Vincovsci, where our little Reformed Church had been damaged by a mortar shell and repaired by way of a gift from our Presbyterian Church's One Great Hour of Sharing. Presiding at the Communion table in the Reformed Church and its cozy manse, where we enjoyed the most glorious coffee cake and strong, hot coffee before worship—presiding there and serving the bread and wine to our Croatian brothers and sisters was a powerful reminder of the reconciling love of Jesus Christ. And a dramatic reminder of the opposite reality was the fact that not far way, just a few blocks in fact, stood the ruins of the Roman Catholic cathedral, bombed by Serbian Orthodox partisans, and a few blocks or so away from the cathedral, the bombed out Orthodox cathedral, destroyed in retaliation, by Croatian Catholics.

In his Second Inaugural, Abraham Lincoln would muse during our own Civil War that "both sides read the same Bible and pray to the same God and invoke his aid against the other." Lincoln, always a pretty good theologian, noted that God could not answer the prayers of both, and probably not either, for that matter (Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865).

It is perhaps providential that we find ourselves thinking this morning about one of the most fascinating stories in the Bible, the story of Jonah. God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, capital of the hated Assyrian Empire, and deliver a message: "Change your ways, repent, or you're in for a lot of trouble." Jonah's response is to book a passage on a boat to Tarshish, a port town on the western coast of Spain, as far away from Nineveh as he could possibly go. Jonah is at least honest about his motives. He not only doesn't want to go to Nineveh, he wants to get away from the presence of the Lord. He sets out for Tarshish, but God sends a great storm. The ship's crew, who are all moral and honest and theologically sensitive, finally throw Jonah overboard, and the storm subsides. God provides a big fish that swallows Jonah. A friend of mine made the mistake of using this story in his children's sermon and asked if the children had any idea what Jonah did in the belly of the whale, and one bright little boy answered that "he got digested," which actually makes a lot of sense.

What the story says is that Jonah offers a prayer and is spewed up on dry land. God calls him a second time. This time Jonah goes to Nineveh, delivers the message, and then sits back to watch the fireworks. The hated Ninevites

are finally going to get theirs. It's a kind of delicious moment, a "God will get them for that" moment. But to everyone's surprise, the Ninevites, from king on down, repent. The Assyrian king, Walter Brueggemann says, is a better theologian than our man Jonah. He has an idea that God can change his mind. God is free to forgive and offer reconciliation. God's mercy in not confined to the chosen people. Jonah is devastated. "I knew all along you wouldn't go through with it," he says. Jonah is so angry he sits down to sulk. God appoints a bush to give him shade. The bush dies, and Jonah is so hot and miserable and exasperated by the whole experience that he says. "It is better for me to die than to live."

The story ends with God gently teaching Jonah a little basic theology—"You are concerned about the bush; should I not be concerned about Ninevah, that great city, in which there are a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals" — which I think is one of the best verses in the Bible.

Here we have a Jewish story about God's mercy toward "them"—the hated foreigners, the racially impure, religiously incorrect, decidedly unchosen. Here, at the heart of our theological tradition, which we sometimes call Judeo-Christian, is the radical notion that God loves Assyrians.

Why have we resisted that? Why can't we seem to get it? Is it because we don't want to? Is it because of our tribalism, our basic human need to define ourselves over against some "other," someone who is not chosen, not pure, not theologically orthodox? Is it is so deep that we simply cannot and will not understand that God doesn't think like that—that, in fact, the tribalism that renders the "other" as expendable is contrary to God, opposed to God's mercy and love and forgiveness and reconciliation at work in the world?

To believe in God at all is to acknowledge that God is not ours alone; it is to acknowledge that God transcends our barriers, even the barriers we create in the name of religion. It is to acknowledge the limits of religion itself and all the accoutrements of religion: creeds, confessions, theological doctrines. One of the very best of Charles Shultz's Peanuts cartoons depicts Snoopy, sitting on top of his doghouse, writing furiously. Charlie Brown asks, "What are you writing?" Snoopy answers, "It's a book on theology." Charlie Brown persists, "And what are you going to call it?" Snoopy looks up from his writing and replies, "The title will be, *Have You Ever Considered That You Might Be Wrong*?" (see Anna Case Winters, *Who Do You Say I Am? Believing in Jesus Christ in the Twenty-First Century*).

Some of our very best say it more academically. The first lesson of monotheism, my mentor Joseph Sittler used to say, is "theological modesty." It is to confess that there is more to God than I can or ever will understand. Hans Küng, who is always in trouble with the Vatican for saying things like

this, said, “No religion has the whole truth, only God alone has the whole truth. Only God is the truth.”

The issue of how much truth of God we can comprehend and write down and put in our creeds and confessions and theological formulas is currently dividing our own church, dividing it perhaps even more deeply than the issue of who can be ordained. There are those who hold to an exclusivist position that belief in Jesus Christ, confession of the Lordship of Christ, acceptance of Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior, is the only way to salvation. And there are many who gladly and gratefully confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ but are not so sure that our confessions and creeds and theological affirmations are the only ways God can save and redeem and bring new life to human beings. And so our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) wrestled honestly with the issue and wrote a good statement, “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ,” which did not satisfy the exclusivists. It includes this statement:

> Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him.

Then goes on to quote the New Testament:

> “God desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4)

And concludes:

> Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.

I’m sure God heaved a great sigh of relief to read that and learn that America Presbyterians, decently and in order and by majority vote, have decided that God is indeed free to be God. Maybe somebody read the story of Jonah.

This is a critical time. We are poised on the brink of war. A massive American military presence has been assembled and is ready to attack Iraq. It appears that our president is determined to do it, alone if necessary. I pray that he will not, particularly alone. But it is terribly important this morning to determine that this and whatever follows will not be a war between civilizations, a conflict between Judeo-Christian West and Arab-Muslim Middle East. There will be many in the Middle East who will interpret it as just that. And so it becomes critically important for us, believers, to reach across the barriers of nation, ethnicity, and religion to

the people of Iraq, who, according to the very best theological tradition, are dearly loved by God and valued by God: their elderly, their weak and sick, their most vulnerable, their strong and young, their women and men, their children—loved and valued by God every bit as much as our own.

We are poised on the brink of the first war we will have initiated, and regardless of your political opinion about the war's necessity or folly, it is critically important for people of faith to acknowledge that we can do better than this, that the resources of this great country can be put to better use. It is important to acknowledge that even when it is necessary, war is always in some way a failure, a sign of human sin; and even when necessary, an affront to the God who loves all human beings equally and deeply and passionately.

Our task in the days ahead, our duty, is to speak our mind, to support or dissent, as we believe we must, but also together to hold out for and hold onto God's universal, inclusive love that excludes no one.

It is a matter of grace, finally: grace here in one of the oldest stories in the Bible—the mystery that God loves human beings, loves you and me, not because of anything about us, but because God is God. We do not like to hear that we are saved by grace, Karl Barth once said. We like to believe that God owes us something. Jonah stumbled all over grace. God's love for the hated Assyrians, decidedly unchosen people, was more than he could stand. But it is the basic message of the story—and the whole Bible. It is a matter of grace, finally, which we have been privileged to see and experience in Jesus Christ, who included everyone in the open-armed embrace of his love, who turned no one away from his friendship and his table. Grace, finally, which invites you and me, regardless of who we are, to a table set in the world by God, a table whose host is none other than Jesus Christ, God's unconditional love incarnate, a table that is both the symbol of that love and the means by which you and I are privileged to know and experience a love like God's love for the people of Nineveh, like God's love for Jonah, even as he was fleeing or sulking, a love that will never let us go.

Amen.